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## THEOLOGY AND TRADITION<sup>1</sup>

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It must be confessed that many a candidate for the Christian ministry nowadays enters upon his course of professional study with misgiving. He is quite clear as to his own purpose, to serve God in his day and generation most directly and effectively by showing Him forth in word and deed. But he has a vague feeling that the curriculum of the theological seminary has nothing very definite to contribute to the preparation for this life-work. A glance at the announcement shows him that it concerns itself largely with the distant past—the writings of the Old and New Testaments, the vicissitudes and controversies of the Church, the theological problems set by dead religious thinkers. While he is eager to rush into the thick of the fray, he is bidden to stay and devote some of his most precious years to a laborious survey of ancient ground. Would it not be better to leave tradition and the traditional disciplines on one side, and give his time and attention at once to the consideration of the present needs of society and of the men and women who compose it? to learn what there is to do, and how to do it?

<sup>1</sup>An address delivered at the opening of Andover Theological Seminary and the Harvard Divinity School, September 23, 1913.

There is even a more serious difficulty. He feels himself separated by seemingly impassable barriers from the methods of study and the attitude of mind which he associates with theology. His life at college has already involved him in a certain degree of contradiction between his intellectual equipment on the one hand and his religious tenets on the other. He has received the mental—that is, the scientific—training of the day. He may not know much science, but he does know something of scientific method, and is completely in sympathy with the scientific spirit. All his college studies were sections of the one great domain of truth; and, in a general way, his knowledge of encyclopedics enabled him to assign to each subject its correlated place in the whole scheme of knowledge. In that scheme there appeared to be no room for even the minimum of elementary theology that he acquired in childhood, which he has accordingly carried along in a separate pocket on the outside. So far as it went, he could not assimilate it to the rest of his thought. Fortunately, it did not go very far. But he has no desire for more of the same thing to harass his spirit. The best his instructors can do for him now is to relieve him of the burden entirely. This they show no signs of doing. So he takes up his tasks with a sense of resignation tempered with anxiety for the survival of his intellectual ingenuousness.

For, do what he will, he cannot suppress a certain mental sympathy with the attitude of those outside critics, sufficiently numerous in modern times even in institutions of learning, who are frankly hostile to all theology and theologians, and whose understanding of the subject may be summed up in some such way as this:

Theology is nothing but tradition, and for the most part hollow tradition. It does indeed pretend to be a science, a discipline setting forth in comprehensible terms a systematized body of facts. Yet it differs

markedly from every science worthy of the name in that its chief appeal is to the testimony and authority of the past. In none of the sciences, to be sure, does wisdom claim to be born with the present generation—many men who are dead and gone have contributed to the existing stores; most of our knowledge is inherited; every science has its body of tradition; the sudden loss of all the books in the world would be an irreparable disaster in every field, and work incalculable harm to our civilization. But the sciences, while they welcome the contributions of the past, do not bow down before them. They appropriate, as a master appropriates the labors of a servant. They accept or reject the conclusions of former days, absorb into their own modern systems whatever they think fit, and march on to fresh trials of truth, which in their turn will be submitted to the judgment of posterity. It is always the present that sits in judgment over the past, never the past that imposes its judgment on the present. In the domain of theology this relation appears to be reversed. The past is the master; the present is the slave, even the worshipper. Tradition is not there a mere convenience, a book of record, a tool, a saving of useless labor; it is the vital principle, the foundation of the whole structure, the authority compelling assent. The truth is such and such because it has been said by men of old time. That these men of old time are esteemed prophets and apostles is not to the point; for where outside of tradition will you find prophet or apostle? In short, science has its traditions, but tradition unalloyed with nobler metal is to be found only in theology.

Moreover, theology bears on its face the evidence of its purely traditional, unscientific character. Truth is one, and science is one. There is not an astronomy according to the French and an astronomy according to the Germans, one European psychology and another

American. But precisely because theology is tradition and not science, there are as many theologies as there are distinct or divergent traditions. For, as we all know, mankind was for many thousands of years separated into distinct races and peoples, having little or no contact with each other. The leaders of each race were naturally confronted with much the same questions regarding the major problems of life and the origin of the ancient racial institutions. As they invariably made shift to answer, each people secured its proper body of tradition. This essentially mythological material was purged out of the sciences of Occidental countries long ago, but it took refuge in religion, and still persists in theology. The adherents of the respective traditions have cherished their several delusions, each increasingly at cross purposes with all the rest. So each community has its "sacred science," its theology. Many peoples; many traditions; many theologies. In later times, more than one of these has attempted to ally itself with the genuine science of mankind, but such attempts have proved abortive, as they were bound to do. There is an arrogance inherent in theology which science cannot abide. For, when theologians admit the unity of truth, it is only to identify the latter with their peculiar *a priori* system, while they vitiate their claim by profound ignorance of other systems, sometimes even by the conviction that to listen to rival claims is a grievous sin. How can it be otherwise? Truth is one and cannot fear itself; falsehoods are many and necessarily fear each other.

Besides being traditional and characteristically plural, theology is, like most uncontrolled tradition, fatally misguided. It professes to transmit truths which we could not ourselves by any possibility discover. These truths were at no time free to any one who chose to seek them. The arbitrarily favored few, even among the people of the remote past, alone had them; they told their fel-

lows; these told their sons, and so on. We of today may lose the precious truth, we may corrupt it; we may neither add to it nor improve it. Yet surely the very fact that we cannot by any possibility discover it should be sufficient to show that it was beyond the power of any former generation to discover. Nowadays men realize their limitations too well to make affirmations on certain subjects; whereas in former times they were less cautious, and they may have been less honest. Anyhow, they knew nothing of the method of ordered thinking; they emitted sentiments, and frequent repetition resulted in the sentiments being finally accepted for pregnant truth even by the originators themselves. In the prevailing dearth of knowledge, spurious information was greedily seized and was jealously transmitted to posterity. The very impossibility of verifying it contrived to render it more and more precious as time went by, till finally men were willing to die for it. It was magnificent, but it was not truth. Such convictions are utterly worthless, though acquired in perfect good faith, and though they come down to us clothed in the imposing language of a by-gone age and freighted with the prestige of the centuries of their vogue.

For the rest, it will already have been noticed that theology actually occupies a field which, but for it, would be left largely vacant. Scientific people, therefore, are disinclined to disturb theology, so long as theology does not attempt to disturb scientific people. In fact, the chief reason why the two camps do not more often come into open collision in modern times is that theology begins at the wrong end of things; it and science have not yet seriously come together, and probably never will. So that if only theology would surrender its claim to constitute a science and be content with the rank of a poem, all might continue well indefinitely. For, instead of starting with the aspect of things in the imme-

diate proximity of the observer and pushing out thence laboriously in the direction of the infinite circumference, which admittedly can never be reached, theology presumes to begin at the unseen circumference, which it foreshortens dreadfully, and straightway makes for the centre with a bound: *In the beginning* (which never was) *God* (of whom one cannot possibly have knowledge) *created* (an act which cannot be conceived by the modern mind) *the heaven* (which demonstrably does not exist) *and the earth* (the only actuality in the whole pronouncement). To be sure, theology is not the only sinner in this respect. Its emancipated sister philosophy also begins at the wrong end. But then no one pretends that the lucubrations of philosophy have any practical relation to human life. Theology does draw practical conclusions and make substantial demands. Herein lies its transgression.

Such is theology according to the critic, whose conception represents a curious but by no means rare blend of the opinions of misguided foe and equally misguided friend.

Not all of this denunciation is subscribed to by our candidate for the ministry, it is needless to say. But some of its implications (the contribution of the misguided friend) he has not learned to discard, and the rest he perhaps cannot easily refute.

Is theological truth necessarily traditional? Is it impossible to harmonize the religious with the intellectual life? Can we not break away from tradition?

The difficulty lies in the formulation of the question. The student of theology may not cut loose from tradition with impunity, and for this simple reason: that *theology is the study of religion, and religion—not theology—is distinctly a traditionary thing*. Theology and religion are correlatives; the one in the domain of science, the other in concrete life and experience. Religion is essen-

tially traditional, and is not a science. Theology is a science, and can never be traditional without ceasing to be theology. This distinction, this analytical antithesis, which is not always exhibited in the table of contents of either religion or theology, is of the utmost importance. The failure to apprehend it clearly is responsible for most of the hostility of the outsider and much of the distress of the insider.

These institutions of learning are dedicated to the study of religion. There is nothing imaginary about their subject; there is nothing mysterious about their method. Religion, coextensive with the sphere of men's interests and the range of their imagination, has always existed in the world, since men first ceased to be animals and became men, and it exists today, an undeniable, an overwhelming fact. Its sentiments, its practices, its beliefs, have profoundly affected the history of the whole human race. At the present time, if we correctly estimate its scope and pervasiveness, we must admit that it exerts an incalculable influence in the affairs of men, although, owing in large measure to the sort of misapprehension we have just depicted, it is often disclaimed where it is actually entertained. For every hypocrite who professes religious sentiments that he does not possess, there are a hundred men who possess religious sentiments which they do not profess.

These sentiments, practices, and beliefs it is the business of theology to assemble, interpret, account for, reconcile, appraise, and (when proper) to commend. In good part they may themselves be the consequences of the theologizing of former ages, but contemporary theology is not responsible for them. Its task is to look them squarely in the face, as the other sciences do any set of facts in the world about us, and declare itself justly and truthfully concerning them in the language of the contemporary understanding.



Theoretically, there is nothing to prevent a thoroughly irreligious man, an atheist, or a depraved man, if you please, from making an excellent theologian. Actually, he would be as little likely to succeed as would a critic of music who had no music in his soul. But it is conceivable that such a man should be a first-rate theorist on certain aspects of the subject.

In all these respects, the study of religion, theology, does not at all differ from any other branch of learning pursued in the university. The study has its ultimate aim, to be sure—to promote and enhance the benefits which men derive from religion; but a corresponding aim may be accredited to every other science of consequence. We have confidence in the beneficent power of the uncovering of the truth concerning our subject. We need not be constantly, or even mainly, occupied in promoting our aim directly and immediately. We may study the principles and history of bridge-building, and conclude which and which methods have proved most useful, and we may determine why—the mathematics, the physics, the economics, the aesthetics, the ethics of bridge-building. But we need not build the bridges of humanity; we may leave them to be built when and where there is occasion, and when there is no time for study.

Now this sort of study of a department of human life and activity cannot be exhausted and its results stereotyped once for all. It cannot disregard the appearance of new material or the adoption of a new angle of view. The political, social, and intellectual life of our own civilization is ever on the move, affecting religion almost at every step; theology must be constantly enlarging its borders and adjusting its theory to meet the altered aspect and relations of religion. On the other hand, there is the accession of new material from the past or present institutions of other peoples, with whom our

intercourse is of comparatively recent origin. These cannot be excluded on any dogmatic principle. Our theory must be wide enough to embrace and harmonize all the facts, whether they relate to savages in the primitive state or to Oriental sages whose civilization and religion were venerable when ours were in their infancy. We are not justified in assuming that they have nothing of value for us.

A "traditional theology," one based upon an assemblage of facts or upon the application of a method other than those of the present day, is a contradiction in terms. Theologies have been cherished long after they have ceased to make intelligible the matter of religion; but when so cherished, they have proved their abdication of the function of theology by themselves becoming the greatest stumbling-block in the way of the understanding, and indirectly of religion. Then they have passed out of the domain of science into that of religious sentiment, and have themselves been transformed into matter for theological study and interpretation. For religious sentiment has a way of crystallizing around utterances which have once rendered signal service to the cause. To address my understanding, as I am at present constituted, that is what I have the right to ask of theology. Of course, I may not demand omniscience. It is no disgrace, but rather the ear-mark of thoroughness and candor, not to profess to know and understand everything. Like all other sciences, theology cannot pursue one tack very long without running up against a stone wall. In that case it will describe the stone wall as a stone wall. There will be no hocus-pocus about it. The study of religion, like the study of any other subject, is based upon the assumption that the human intelligence, in its natural state, may be applied to its understanding; and upon the further assumption that, as in every other department of life, so too in the

domain of religion, power is multiplied by the application of trained intelligence, however limited.

Needless to say that when we affirm that theology, as a science, must be one, though the religions which it studies are many and various traditions, we do not imply that all traditions are equally important or concern us all to the same degree. A man may be an historian, employing the scientific historian's method, reckoning at every step with the principle that all history is one and its true results in perfect harmony with each other. Yet he may consciously and deliberately limit himself to the investigation of the history, let us say, of the British Empire. He will be more likely to be interested in this if he be a British subject, and more likely to bring to his study patience, industry, and zeal, if he be an ardent British patriot, proud of British achievements and loyal to British institutions. But his history will not sacrifice truth to patriotism. Indeed, the more firm his faith in his country's integrity, the more eager he will be to let all the facts speak for themselves. So with theology. The scholar may consciously apply himself to the special study of Christianity as that section of the subject which has paramount interest for him. And the best theology of Christianity—I purposely avoid the expression “Christian theology”—will be that of the Christian man, if only because he alone can estimate the force and value of the Christian tradition at the present time.

But while it is true that the intelligence must be brought to bear upon the sentiments, practices, and beliefs of religion, it is equally true that the intelligence cannot take their place. In due time, theory may affect the facts, but meanwhile the theory must be based upon the facts. The actual content of religion, which the theologian does not create but finds, is the subject of his study.

Now what I wish to emphasize particularly at this time is that this actual content of religion is, to a very great degree, continuous and abiding. Changes here are relatively rare and invariably fractional. For the most part, they consist of additions to an existing stock, although subtractions and even substantial losses are not unknown. Religion is essentially an inheritance—if you please, a *great tradition*.

We must not let ourselves be frightened by this word “tradition.” The most valuable, the most indispensable, the most undying things humanity possesses are traditions, incapable of being produced in a day, or a year, or a century, but requiring countless ages of human history to evolve. A few things, like the steam-engine and the electric battery and dynamite, are new. The things that are honorable, the things that are just, the things that are pure and lovely and of good report, are at least older than the apostle Paul; and, for us men, their age is of their essence. We may continue to think on them without disloyalty to the progressive spirit of the times.

A concrete illustration may help us to a better understanding of the matter. Imagine the world suddenly deprived of human language. It would be reduced to a state of pitiable impotence and emptiness; all society, all institutions, all law, all knowledge, all art, in time even all character, would be swept away. We should be animals once more, without the saving grace of animal instinct. Yet human speech is very distinctly a tradition, and nothing but a tradition. Men do not say to each other, “Go to, let us construct us a language.” Nor are they born with it. They cannot originate it each for himself. It is handed down from one generation to another. The very faculty of employing the vocal organs in speech is dependent upon the hearing of other men’s speech in the learner’s infancy. Lan-

guage is an organism carried by the living spirit of the race, while the successive generations come and go. It changes constantly, to be sure; but the changes are infinitesimal when compared with the lexical volume of the whole and its persistent syntactical cast. Moreover, being only a tradition, it pleads guilty to the indictment brought against religion: it differs always, sometimes *in toto*, among people of different races; although contact between race and race results in the borrowing of words and the ideas which they represent. Sometimes, in exceptional circumstances, it results in the wholesale adoption of a foreign tradition. Language likewise exhibits strange irregularities and eccentricities. And the early stages of its history, particularly those which precede the age of written documents, are exceedingly difficult to trace. Altogether, it is a very complex organism, or rather, a discordant aggregation of organisms, which have only this in common, that they employ in the main the same organs of the body, follow more or less the same lines of growth and development, and correspond in some measure to one and the same conceptual background. Some languages are rich, others poor; some advanced, others backward. Some introduce us to the most lofty and ennobling thought and to poetic creations of wondrous beauty; others have been employed only for the grossest and most elementary purposes.

Nor is it an accident that language is traditional. It is inconceivable that it should be anything else. There literally is not time enough in a lifetime to produce it. After having yourself enjoyed the blessings of traditional language for half a lifetime, but not before, you may very partially invent an artificial language (like Volapük or Esperanto) on paper. But you will never get people that are quite sane to speak it, or even insane people to think in it.

The illustration need not be pressed. It serves well enough to demonstrate the proposition that tradition is by no means synonymous with fiction or worthlessness; that, on the contrary, it may be characteristic of the most valued and indispensable possessions of mankind.

Now religion is just such a world-wide tradition or congeries of traditions as language. It is an inheritance, which derives its power and importance from the fact that it is coextensive with the cultural history of the race, a sort of age-long correlative to our needs and faculties.

So far as mere volume is concerned, we are apt to exaggerate the proportion of new material to old even in what are known as the historic religions. No religion can be traced to its beginnings; least of all those "founded," as we say, by a great religious leader in historic times. Religious leaders have never, unless they were impostors or demented, conceived of themselves as "founding" a new religion. "I came not to destroy but to fulfil," said the greatest of them. In any case, to call a religion historic is to admit that its career began long ago, and that it owes something to its duration.

Christianity is no exception to this characterization of religion as tradition. It is an inheritance, whose power over our lives derives directly from the fact that it comes down to us hallowed with the associations of generations of religious experience; that it represents the emotions, the gropings and yearnings, the sufferings and the triumphs, of many times two thousand years.

It is hardly necessary to point out that, when we say religion is an inheritance, we are far from implying that it is something we receive in purely passive fashion, as into a receptacle, and pass on unaltered. A physical inheritance that fails to yield income loses, in so far forth,

the character of an inheritance. The same is true of an ideal inheritance. There must be profit while it is in our hands or there will be loss; though here too, fortunately for most of us, unearned increment is not unknown.

Finally, if religion in general or Christianity in particular is a great tradition, we cannot pretend to grasp or understand it adequately if we limit our survey to its present manifestation in human life; any more than the study of language and literature can be begun, continued, and ended in the market place. The life of the soul cannot be studied in space, but only in time; and time has but one dimension. It is the greater part of the actual task of theology to study and to rationalize the history and the historic products of religion. It must, for example, identify its prophets and teachers, not so much by name, as by correct delineation of their personality and correct determination of their historical situation, and so wrest from them the secret of their power. It must substitute the principle of sympathetic understanding for that of authority, and so render more fruitful the example of the great men of the past. It must thoroughly humanize the prophet, the apostle, the saint, the reformer—(may we not say?) the Lord Jesus himself. For only as they are humanized can we really be persuaded to emulate their lives and service. No one that has read the Epistles of Saint Paul doubts that he was an apostle; but the colossal labors of recent years have not yet succeeded in making him thoroughly intelligible as a man. No one that has read the Gospels doubts that Jesus of Nazareth was divine; the difficulty still remains to think of him as human. So with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel; as yet Old Testament studies have done little more than magnify the problems which they present. Theology cannot stop till it has completely humanized these generators and moulders of our faith.

When this has been achieved by patient study of the complex intellectual and moral setting in which they lived and labored, we shall know better what constitutes an inspired man of God, and what it is that we are to reproduce in our lives and characters. Nor can we doubt that themselves would be the first to welcome the achievement. "Henceforth I call you not servants, for the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from my Father I have made known unto you." This is a prophecy of the time to come.